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HISTORY OF THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN COTTON MILLS. PART II *

EARLY MILL OPERATIVES. CONDITIONS OF LIFE AND WORK

Turning from the more technical questions connected with the employment of women in the mills, it is important to note the changes in the social aspects of their work. There is a traditional belief that the early cotton industry was carried on under idyllic conditions in this country, particularly in New England. Lowell, the famous "City of Spindles" of the period from 1825 to 1850, when Lucy Larcom and her friends worked in the mills and published the *Lowell Offering*, is frequently compared with the Lowell of the twentieth century, where only 8 per cent. of the inhabitants are of native parentage, and where the mills are filled with Irish, French, Canadians, Armenians, Portuguese, and Poles; and it is pointed out that evidence is not lacking to show that the factory population of New England has deteriorated. In attempting, however, to trace the changes that the last fifty years have brought about, it is necessary to consider conditions of life and work apart from the character and nationality of the operatives. With regard to the former, we find such unmistakable improvements—shorter hours, more sanitary mills and towns—that if the same class of operatives had remained, we should record a large measure of progress.

But the most striking feature in the evolution of the New England factory town is the change in the character of the operatives—the fact that the women in the mills today are not the deteriorated descendants of the girls who formed Improvement Circles and attended Emerson's Lyceum lectures. The granddaughters of the first mill girls are now to be found in the

* Part I, *Statistics of Employment*, appeared in the preceding number of this journal. The writer is under obligation to the Carnegie Institution of Washington for assistance in the preparation of these and other articles in this series.

women's colleges, while the women who have taken their places in the mills are immigrants or the children of immigrants—in the terms of the well-known census classification “foreign-born or of foreign parentage.”

Lucy Larcom once said that “there was, indeed, nothing peculiar about the Lowell mill girls, except that they were New England girls of the older and hardier stock.”¹ This one point of difference, however, is so fundamental that it made the mill town of that time a different world from the immigrant factory city of today. And it is, further, symptomatic of the line of delimitation that is now drawn between occupations for middle-class and occupations for working-class women. Before 1850 this line was scarcely discernible in New England, and work in the Lowell mills involved no social degradation. Indeed there was no “field of employment” for educated women, and opportunities for training practically did not exist. A few months’ term as a schoolmistress was a very unremunerative occupation, and this was most frequently combined with mill work as a sort of by-employment.² Then, too, the old respectable domestic occupations had been taken away from the household. Spinning and weaving were no longer a source of income except as factory work. Tailoring was still left, and a few minor employments, but to be self-supporting in the home was difficult.³ It was these daughters of New England farmers—girls with energy, perse-

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XLVIII, p. 600.

² See *supra*, note 18.

³ The *Lowell Offering*, Vol. V, p. 279, contains an interesting account of the occupations of well-to-do farmers’ daughters in the thirties. In an ordinary family, one of the girls would become the maid-of-all-work and house- and farm-manager, serving as nurse, cook, dairy-maid, laundress, and seamstress; a second would be the village milliner and mantua-maker; the third go from home for a time and learn to be a tailoress; the fourth would set up a little dry-goods establishment; the fifth became the village schoolmistress. Lucy Larcom, in her various reminiscences, also calls attention to the scarcity of employments for girls of her class. “The fertile prairies of the West had already attracted the more energetic young men, but their sisters remained at home, and the family burdens often pressed upon them very heavily. A girl’s opportunities for earning money were few, and the amount received was small for such employments as straw-braiding, binding shoes, dressmaking, and domestic labor.”—*Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XLVIII, p. 595.

verance, and ambition to do, not only for themselves but for others, who for a period of nearly half a century (roughly from 1800 to 1850) formed the great body of cotton-mill employees in certain parts of New England. These girls were the sisters of the young men who were "going West" to the great states of the prairie country, and they had something of the pioneer spirit themselves—a willingness to venture into a new industrial world, and confidence in their ability to make it a world in which they could live with dignity and self-respect. They had attended the common schools, and some of them were saving their hard-won earnings to enter the well-known women's academies or seminaries of the day.⁴ In short, the underlying cause which made the first great "city of spindles" so exceptional was the presence in the mills of young women of character and ability, to whom at that time few other employments were open.⁵ When an opportunity suddenly came to them to satisfy their desire for pecuniary independence and their longing for educational advantages by engaging in factory work, there was no reason for hesitation, save a vague prejudice against factory labor which had grown out of stories of English mill towns. This did, for a time, perhaps, act as a deterrent and many girls preferred to go on working at some more "genteel" employment at seventy-five cents a week and board;⁶ but the influence of the bolder spirits was soon felt and steady work at high wages became an attraction too great to resist. There was, after all, no reason why they should not do together work which their mothers had been doing in their own homes. They went eagerly, therefore,

⁴ Lucy Larcom wrote that "for twenty years or more Lowell might have been looked upon as a rather select industrial school for young people. The girls there were just such girls as are knocking at the doors of young women's colleges today. They had come to work with their hands, but they could not hinder the working of their minds also. . . . Many of them were supporting themselves at schools like Bradford Academy or Ipswich Seminary half the year, by working in the mills the other half. Mt. Holyoke Seminary broke upon the thoughts of many of them as a vision of hope."—*New England Girlhood*, pp. 222-3.

⁵ See "Harriet Martineau and the Employment of Women in 1836," *Journal of Political Economy*, December, 1907.

⁶ Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, p. 61.

long distances to Lowell,⁷ to Waltham, to Manchester, and other early mill cities. Statistics for 1840 showed that of 6,320 women in the Lowell mills, only one-eighth were from Massachusetts, while one-fourth were from Maine, one-third from New Hampshire, one-fifth from Vermont, one-fourth from Ireland, and one-fourteenth from Canada and elsewhere.⁸

Since their operatives were for the most part young women of good families living temporarily away from their homes, the corporations, if they wished to keep this highly desirable body of employees, were obliged to provide suitable living accommodations for them in the new factory towns. To meet this need the corporation boarding-house was devised. Rows of brick tenements were built near the mills of the corporation, and these were rented for boarding-houses to women of known respectability and even of genuine refinement. The Merrimack corporation at Lowell in 1849 owned 178 houses—35 boarding-houses for women operatives, 10 for men, and a large number of company tenements.

Perhaps the most typical head of a corporation boarding-house was a widow who was left with a family to provide for, and whose own daughters could work in the mills.⁹ Such women

⁷ Special attention is given to Lowell in this discussion, as the most conspicuous of the early mill towns, and throughout the history of the cotton industry, and still at the present time, an important and typical one. Other towns in the "Lowell district," which included Maine and New Hampshire, were modelled after it. In Rhode Island and the district about Providence, the "family-system" prevailed, and conditions were much less satisfactory. (For a discussion of the differences between the two sections, see the *Journal of Sociology*, July, 1908, pp. 29, 30.)

⁸ Rev. Henry A. Miles, *Lowell as It Was and as It Is* (2d ed., Lowell, 1847), p. 193. This association with girls from different places, in a period when traveling was almost unknown, was greatly appreciated. Miss Larcom calls attention to it in her *New England Girlhood*, p. 152: "Most of my mother's boarders were from New Hampshire and Vermont, and there was a fresh, breezy sociability about them which made them seem almost like a different race of beings from any we children had hitherto known."

⁹ Thus Lucy Larcom's mother provided for her eight children by moving to Lowell and taking mill-girl boarders in a corporation tenement; Harriet Hanson's aunt and mother are other examples of these notable "house-mothers" or "boarding-women" as they were often called.

were, of course, likely to be very much interested in everything connected with the welfare of the girls under their care. But the corporations themselves were not lax in the matter and had rules and regulations drawn up regarding the conduct of the girls in their boarding-houses; thus they not only controlled the dwelling-places and food of their operatives, but dictated the time of going to bed and the rules of social intercourse.¹⁰ This was the high tide of corporation paternalism in New England, when the girls not only slept in company houses, but went to company churches, and frequently spent their earnings at company stores.¹¹ When a girl entered a Lowell mill, she was required to

¹⁰ Note A, at the close of Part III, will contain the rules used in Lowell and in the Poignaud and Plant boarding-houses at Lancaster.

For the most part, the operatives seem to have liked the system well enough in the early days though complaints are sometimes met with which indicate some measure of opposition. In one of the early *Factory Tracts*, issued by the Female Labor Reform Association in Lowell, complaint is made of the long hours and of the extent of corporation control: "When she is at last released from her wearisome day's toil, still may she not depart in peace. No! her footsteps must be dogged to see that they do not drag beyond the corporation limits, and she *must*, whether she will or no, be subjected to the manifold inconveniences of a large crowded boarding-house, where, too, the price paid for her accommodation is so utterly insignificant that it will not insure to her the common comforts of life."—From a pamphlet in the Boston Public Library, *Factory Tracts*.

¹¹ Company stores were not a feature of the Lowell system, but they were common enough in the early factory days throughout New England. I found, for example, in attempting to ascertain from the *Poignaud and Plant Papers*, referred to above, the earnings of some of the girls who worked in the Lancaster mills, that it was almost impossible to find out what their wages really were. They were charged with purchases made irregularly at "the store,"—chiefly articles like umbrellas, bibles, hymnbooks, strings of beads, pocketbooks, or gloves, and it was extremely difficult to use them as a basis for estimating weekly earnings. But perhaps the story of Hannah Borden of Fall River (Part I, note 16) is the most interesting illustration of the way in which the company store was managed to the profit of the stockholders. Wages in the Fall River mills were never paid in money but always in goods from the company store. Accounts so invariably showed a balance in favor of the mill owners that the employees began to be much dissatisfied. Hannah Borden's position was a peculiarly independent one, not merely because she was a daughter of a stockholder but because she was the best weaver in the city and the company could not afford to lose her. She felt that it was unfair that the operatives should not be allowed to see their accounts, and felt so certain that her own were not correct that she went to the agent and threatened to

sign what was known as a "regulation paper" binding herself to attend regularly some place of public worship. On the Merrimack corporation, during the period known as "Kirk Boott's reign," every operative was obliged to pay a regular monthly fee for the support of St. Anne's, an Episcopalian church established by Mr. Boott, without regard to the different religious beliefs of his operatives.¹² There had grown up, in short, a thoroughgoing system of corporation control, and it was in harmony with that system that boarding-house keepers, as well as overseers, were to be directly responsible to the agent for the moral as well as the physical welfare of those in their care.¹³ It was a rule that no immoral person should be employed in any capacity in the mills, and there is every reason to believe that it was rigidly enforced. Indeed, abundant evidence exists to show that "from the beginning, Lowell had a high reputation for good order, morality, piety, and all that was dear to the old-fashioned New Englander's heart."

It followed as a matter of course that these capable ambitious girls did not stay long in the mills. James Montgomery leave unless he would let her see the books. He ordered them sent up, and Miss Borden found articles like suspenders and rum charged against her. She finally demanded money wages as the only condition on which she would remain in the mill, and the granting of her demand soon led the other hands to insist on the same treatment, and money wages for everyone became the rule.

¹² The agent of the company let the pews to persons employed by the company or occupying company houses; the company made the contract with the rector and paid his salary and the other expenses of the church and reserved from the wages of each person in their employ a fixed yearly sum for "purposes of public worship, no matter whether they attended this church or not." See Justice Hoar's opinion in the case of the Attorney General *ex. rel.* The Rector, etc., of St. Anne's Church *vs.* The Merrimack Corporation (pamphlet, Boston Public Library, pp. 6, 7). See also Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 78 and p. 21, and Larcom, *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. XLVIII, p. 595. The operatives seem to have greatly resented the "company church." A further example of the attempt of the corporations to compel the operatives to go to church may be found in the rules of the Lowell Manufacturing Company, in the note at the close of this article.

¹³ The corporations had, at first, paid part of the operatives' board directly to the boarding-house keepers. Later they withdrew this sum and the girls were obliged to pay an additional twenty-five cents a week for board. This was a virtual reduction of wages and caused the first strike among the Lowell operatives. See Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

described them as "farmers' daughters who come into the factory for perhaps a year or two, and frequently for but a few months until they make a little money to purchase clothes, etc., and then go home." There are, he said, "great numbers of inexperienced hands in every factory."¹⁴ Many of them were working to get money for some cherished project: sending a brother to college or preparing him for the ministry; paying off a mortgage on the paternal farm; or earning money for their own education that they might become superior schoolmistresses or even missionaries. Girls of this latter class were, moreover, often eager to avail themselves of the "opportunities" which a city like Lowell offered, and from which they were quite shut off in lonely farm-houses and country villages. In Lowell there was the Lyceum, which brought John Quincy Adams and Edward Everett and Ralph Waldo Emerson there to lecture, and which was said to be "more patronized by the mill people than any mere entertainment" of that day; indeed, the women operatives formed two-thirds of the Lyceum audiences. There were "lending-libraries" too, and as a further means of culture a "debating-club;" and the churches with their female benevolent societies, female charitable societies, female education societies, female missionary societies; indeed, "female" circles of every kind furnished an outlet for activities of many sorts.¹⁵ More definitely their own were the French or German classes which some of the girls maintained in their factory boarding-house and the famous "Improvement Circle" of whose work the files of the *Lowell Offering* bear lasting testimony.¹⁶ Symptomatic too of the intellectual interests of the

¹⁴ Montgomery, *The Cotton Manufacture in the United States of America* (Glasgow, 1840).

¹⁵ See, for example, the list in Benjamin Floyd's *Supplement to the Lowell Directory of 1836, Containing Names of the Females Employed and Places of Employment in the Various Manufacturing Establishments in this City, etc.* (Lowell, 1836).

¹⁶ The *Lowell Offering: A Repository of Original Articles Written Exclusively by Females Actively Employed in the Mills, 1841-1845*, 5 vols., and the *New England Offering: A Magazine of Industry Written by Females Who Are or Who Have Been Factory Operatives*. Harriet Farley, ed., (1845-1850) 3 vols. See Lucy Larcom, "Mill Girls' Magazine," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XLVIII, and Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, chaps. vi, vii.

operatives is the fact that rules were needed to prevent reading in the mills. Bringing books with them when they came to work was strictly forbidden and among an old list of discharges, the following, evidently typical, case appears :

"March 14, 1839. Ann ———, No. 2 spinning room; discharged for reading in the mill; gave her a line stating the facts."¹⁷

With real Puritan zeal the girls tried to evade the rule by refusing to believe that the Bible could be among the forbidden books, and so persistently were the Scriptures taken into the mill that an overseer who "cared more for law than for gospel" reaped a harvest of confiscated bibles. To large numbers of earnest and ambitious New England girls in the second quarter of the last century, the cotton mill spelled opportunity, and opened for them paths of knowledge and independence of which in the past they had only vaguely dreamed.

Work in the mills competed as an alternative employment with teaching, and it was very common to find the schoolmistress in the mill during part of the year at least.¹⁸ On the Merrimack corporation alone there were at one time more than one hundred and fifty women operatives who had been at some time engaged in teaching school.¹⁹ Some of them still taught in the summer

¹⁷ Miles, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-40. And see Larcom, *New England Girlhood*, pp. 175, 181. The point of view is expressed in an editorial statement: "We hope that while our hands weave ponderous rolls, our heads may generate something worth a place in memory's storehouse," *Operatives' Magazine*, p. 80 (1841).

¹⁸ In Lucy Larcom's *An Idyl of Work* (Boston, 1875), which is described in the preface as a "truthful sketch of factory life drawn from the memory of it during the time, about thirty years since, when the work of the mills was done almost entirely by young girls from various parts of New England," one of the characters thus described herself and her associates :

In plain words
I am a school ma'am in the summer time
As now I am a Lady of the Loom.
. . . . inside those factory walls
The daughters of our honest yeomanry,
Children of tradesmen, teachers, clergymen,
Their own condition make in mingling.

¹⁹ Statement of superintendent of the Merrimack Mills quoted in *Fifth Annual Report, Massachusetts State Board of Education*, p. 98, the Superintendent added, "The average wages of these ex-teachers I find to be 17¾ per cent. above the general average of our mills, and about 40 per cent. above the wages of the twenty-six who cannot write their names." A similar statement in Massachusetts House Document No. 98, p. 14, estimates the number of teachers at 180.

and returned to factory work for the winter months. Miss Larcom tells us that an agent who came from the West for school teachers was told by her own pastor that five hundred could easily be furnished from among Lowell mill girls.²⁰ And the ranks of the primary- and grammar-school teachers in Lowell were frequently replenished from among the mill girls. Teaching was far from being a satisfactory employment for women in the first half of the century. The expediency of employing more women teachers was urged upon the various towns in Massachusetts in 1837, but a decade later, when Horace Mann issued his final report, he was obliged to call attention to the fact that schoolmistresses were still so inadequately paid that women in many occupations in mills and factories earned six or seven times as much as women teachers. Higher salaries and more permanent employment would be necessary, he said, before school committees could

escape the mortification which they now sometimes suffer, of being overbid by a capitalist who wants them for his factory and who can afford to pay them more for superintending a loom or a spinning frame.²¹

The mills offered not only regular employment and higher wages, but educational advantages which many of the operatives prized even more highly. Moreover the girl who had worked in Lowell was looked upon with respect as a person of importance when she returned to her rural neighborhood. Her fashionable dress and manners and her general air of independence were greatly envied by those who had not been to the metropolis and enjoyed its advantages.²²

²⁰ *New England Girlhood*, p. 256. It is scarcely necessary to add that many did go, and that this and similar "openings" operated to withdraw girls of this class into superior occupations.

²¹ See *Report Massachusetts Board of Education for 1847*, pp. 26-30.

²² See e. g., the *Lowell Offering* passim, and Scoresby, *op. cit.*, chap. iii, §2. The following extract from a mill girl's contribution to Volume I of the *Offering* well expresses the current opinion of the opportunities of Lowell: "One year elapsed before we visited our homes. During that time our friends had become more reconciled to our employment—for instead of three months in a year as teachers, we then had constant employment which furnished us the means of advancing our education, which we otherwise could not have done. Besides, we had acquired much information from observation, extensive reading, lyceums, and other means of increasing our "little fund of knowledge" (I, p. 77).

The women operatives were pretty uniformly of the same age at this period, few of them being younger than sixteen or older than twenty-five, and the great majority in the early twenties.²³ Although the practice of employing very young children in cotton mills was common enough at this time, yet in Lowell, Waltham, and similar places where the company boarding-house system was maintained, the employment of children was unprofitable since the cost of board was more than a child could earn. In Rhode Island and the adjoining parts of Massachusetts and Connecticut, the "English" or "family system" of hiring operatives was the rule, and it meant, of course, a much larger number of children among the employees than were to be found where the system of hiring individual operatives prevailed.²⁴ Kirk Boott's estimate for Lowell, it may be remembered, was that in 1827, in six mills employing twelve hundred persons, nine-tenths of the operatives were females and only twenty were from twelve to fourteen years of age. Certainly there must have been some children under twelve, for Mrs. Robinson was only ten years old and Lucy Larcom was eleven when they began work in the Lowell mills.²⁵ Extreme youth, however, was no more rare than age. Out of a thousand women employed by the Lawrence corporation, there were only thirty who were either married or widowed. In striking contrast is the Lowell of today where 30 per cent. of all the women in the cotton mills are married, widowed, or divorced, and where fewer than half fall within the age group of sixteen to twenty-four, which contained practically all of the women of the early period.²⁶ Census statistics do not show, for cities like Lowell, how large a proportion of the married women operatives

²³ For estimates, see Carey, *op. cit.*, p. 88, and Rev. William Scoresby, *American Factories and Their Female Operatives* (London, 1845), p. 53.

²⁴ See Batchelder, *Introduction and Early Progress of the Cotton Manufacture in the U. S.* (Boston, 1863), pp. 74, 75. The employment of children at this period is discussed in an article on "The Early History of Child Labor in America," *American Journal of Sociology*, July, 1908.

²⁵ Robinson, *op. cit.*, chap. ii, "Child Life in the Lowell Mills;" and Larcom, *New England Girlhood*, pp. 153, 154. Their employment may perhaps be explained by the fact that their mothers were keeping corporation boarding-houses in Lowell.

²⁶ See statistics from *Twelfth Census of Occupations*, p. 600, which contains

are foreign-born or of foreign parentage; but such statistics are given for the United States and are of interest in this connection. The following tables show the conjugal condition of women in the cotton mills of the United States:

TABLE I*

CONJUGAL CONDITION OF WOMEN IN COTTON MILLS, 1900

Married.....	19,688
Widowed.....	5,381
Divorced.....	485
	<hr/>
	25,584
Single or unknown.....	95,049
	<hr/>
	120,603

TABLE II†

PARENTAGE OF MARRIED WOMEN IN COTTON MILLS

Native, white, native parents.....	6,610
Native, white, foreign parents.....	2,337
Foreign white.....	10,680
Negroes.....	61
	<hr/>
Total.....	19,627

* Twelfth Census, "Occupations," p. ccxxii.

† *Ibid.*, p. ccxiv.

From these data, which show that, of the 19,688 married women, 13,017 were either foreign-born or of foreign parentage, it is clear that the presence of married women in the mill and a great numerical increase in the higher-age groups are unquestionably a result of the employment of immigrant women.

Since so large a proportion of the inhabitants of Lowell in its first decades were mill hands, early census data showing the distribution of the whole population in age groups supply to some extent the lack of data showing the ages of those employed.

the following data regarding the age and conjugal condition of the women cotton-mill operatives of Lowell in 1900:

Married.....	1,112	Age 10-15.....	206
Widowed.....	364	Age 16-24.....	2,049
Divorced.....	14	Age 25-44.....	2,144
	<hr/>	Age 45-64.....	482
	1,490	Age 65 up.....	36
Single.....	3,441		<hr/>
	<hr/>		
Total.....	4,931	Total.....	4,917

Age groups in the same industry for the United States as a whole show a much larger percentage of women operatives under twenty-five. This is of course due to the wide extent of child labor in some sections.

For 1830 and 1840 we have the following age distribution of its inhabitants:

POPULATION OF LOWELL

	IN 1830		IN 1840	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Under 10 years.....	495	504	1,865	1,865
10-20 years.....	405	1,182	1,369	3,464
20-30 years.....	958	1,792	2,143	5,568
30-40 years.....	358	353	1,128	1,605
40-50 years.....	111	164	520	650
50-60 years.....	37	57	224	318
More than 60 years.....	21	29	92	170
Total.....	2,392	4,085	7,341	13,640

* Data from Table XXXV in *Brief Remarks on the Hygiene of Massachusetts, but More Particularly of the Cities of Boston and Lowell*, by Josiah Curtis, M.D., (Philadelphia, 1849), p. 681.

In the decade 1830-40, therefore, women formed nearly two-thirds, that is, 63 per cent. in 1830 and 65 per cent. in 1840, of the population of Lowell, and from 80 to 85 per cent. of all the women were under thirty years of age. Undoubtedly the fact that so large a proportion of the inhabitants were young and vigorous recruits from New England farms explained the low death rate of Lowell. By contemporary supporters of the system, however, the satisfactory condition of her bills of mortality was pointed to with pride as an evidence of the healthfulness of factory work and the superior conditions under which the operatives lived. As a matter of fact, it does not seem as if the conditions either in the mills or the boarding-houses could have been healthful, but the girls stayed so short a time, and brought such good constitutions with them from the farms, that they seemingly escaped ill-health as a result; or, if they became ill, they at once went back to their homes and Lowell's bill of health was left clean.²⁷ Many of them, too, worked only eight or ten months of the year and spent the rest of the time in their country homes.

²⁷ Dr. Curtis in discussing this point said, "We are not able to say how many leave on account of ill-health, nor how many of these became ill while connected with the mills, nor how many of these can trace the cause of declining health to influences connected with their employment," *op. cit.*, p. 29. An extract from the *Offering*, which was inclined to take a most optimistic view of Lowell

It is a popular assumption that early mill conditions were as superior as the early body of operatives. It is, however, an assumption not borne out by the facts. But a discussion of this point and of the evidence on which it is based must be reserved for Part III which will conclude this article.

EDITH ABBOTT

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF CIVICS AND PHILANTHROPY

conditions, is of interest: "The daughter leaves the farm, it is said, a plump, rosy-cheeked, strong, and laughing girl, and in one year comes back to them—better clad, 'tis true, and with refined manners, and money for the discharge of their little debts and for the supply of their little wants, but alas, how changed! . . . This is a dark picture, but there are even darker realities, and these in no inconsiderable numbers."— *New England Offering*, April, 1848, p. 4.

[*To be concluded*]